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Recycling & waste - European Parliament votes for new EU rules

The European Parliament yesterday voted to beef up a proposed new EU directive setting out a framework for how to deal with the growing mountains of waste produced across the European Union.

Among the amendments adopted by MEPs in this first reading of the proposal:

- The establishment of a **hierarchy in the treatment of waste** for the first time in a piece of EU legislation. The 'hierarchy' lays down an order of preference for waste operations: re-use; recycling; other recovery operations; and, as a last resort, safe and environmentally sound disposal;
- On **incinerators**, MEPs backed the energy efficiency principle by setting out a scale of standards to be met by incinerators; a majority of MEPs, however, rejected the idea that incineration should be regarded as recovery;
- Targets for **prevention of waste** would have to be laid down for each Member State by 2010 and reached by 2020; with a view to stabilising waste production at 2008 levels by 2012, Member States would have to draw up national prevention programmes within 18 months of the directive entering into force;
- On **recycling**, MEPs introduced a 50% target for municipal waste by 2020 and 70% recycling or re-use of waste from construction, demolition, industry and manufacturing.

Unless the Council of Ministers accepts all of the amendments adopted this week, the directive will return for a 2nd reading in the European Parliament at a later stage.

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For further details, see: http://www.europarl.europa.eu/news/expert/default_en.htm

Excerpts from Monday's debate (12 February 2007) in Strasbourg

Caroline Jackson (Conservative, South West - rapporteur): We do not want a repeat, as the Commissioner has said, of what happened recently where recourse to the European Court of Justice for clarification has sometimes produced judgments that are confusing, contradictory and just plain bizarre. Legislators, not judges, should make laws.

We have spent much time defining the waste hierarchy. This is often referred to, but until now has not been defined in any EU legal text. The committee preferred the five-stage waste hierarchy to the Commission's rather muddled, flatter version. The problem is how to establish that the hierarchy should not be used as a rigid requirement, but should be seen as a flexible but general principle

We grappled with the issue of how one defines when waste ceases to be a waste. This gave us the opportunity to indicate through this directive which items should be given priority by the Commission, if necessary by drawing up specifications to define when they cease to be waste.

Finally, there is the question of the energy efficiency criteria, which, if met by a particular energy from a waste plant, would allow that plant to be categorised as a recovery and not a disposal operation. This seems to me an eminently sensible idea. Such a designation has environmental and commercial advantages. The criteria for designation as a recovery operation need to be high enough to be something of a gold standard

Although this is a directive that mainly defines terms, we felt it should address the issue of waste prevention. It is no good the EU being a world leader in waste terminology if it continues to be a world leader in waste generation. I am therefore proud that, at my suggestion, Parliament's amendments contain for the first time a proposal for an EU commitment to stabilise overall waste production by 2012 at the levels which it reached in 2008.

Jill Evans (Plaid Cymru, Wales): Our group could vote for the report tomorrow if this Parliament upholds the position of the Committee on Environment, Public Health and Food Safety but I fear that will not be the case.

The basis of the whole waste strategy must be the binding five-step waste hierarchy of prevention, reuse, recycling, recovery and disposal. It is essential to have national prevention programmes with Europe-wide measures and targets. Prevention has been talked about an awful lot since the first directive back in 1975 but we have seen very little action and we have heard many excuses for not doing it. That is why we welcome the target of stabilisation of waste by 2012.

We also support EU-wide recycling targets. A 50% recycling level for municipal waste and 70% for construction, demolition, industrial and manufacturing waste by 2020 is perfectly achievable and realistic.

But the key issue for us in this directive is incineration. Reclassifying waste incineration as energy recovery would completely undermine measures on preventing and recycling. Yes, we have to move away from landfill, that is a legal obligation already. But incineration is not the answer.

Jim Allister (DUP, Northern Ireland): As ever, the answer from Brussels seems to be more legislation. Would it not be more sensible to review the existing laws and make them work before adding new layers of legislation? If legislation is being poorly implemented, if there are different approaches to solving the waste problem, if current wording causes differing interpretations, what will be usefully added by putting in new laws without first streamlining, and ensuring implementation of, the existing legislation?

Tom Wise (UKIP, Eastern): Mr President, here we see one of the few cases where this Parliament is asked for real legislative input as part of a codecision procedure. Mrs Jackson has duly compiled the report but, not content with that, Parliament throws in Mr Blokland's report as well, an own-initiative report with no legislative relevance, and the subject - waste! How much paper was wasted printing this report?

LINKS

Debate of 12 February 2007 in the speakers' original language:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+CRE+20070212+ITEM-014+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN>

Text adopted by the European Parliament (13 February 2007):

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?pubRef=-//EP//TEXT+TA+P6-TA-2007-0029+0+DOC+XML+V0//EN&language=EN>

Report:

Report on the proposal for a directive on waste (A6-0466/2006) by Caroline Jackson MEP:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?objRefId=134842&language=EN>

Summary of procedure in the European Parliament's Legislative Observatory:

<http://www.europarl.europa.eu/oeil/file.jsp?id=5303132>

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Tom Wise MEP: <http://www.europarl.org.uk/requetes/wise.asp>

Bairbre de Brún MEP spoke in Irish during the debate:

<http://www.europarl.org.uk/requetes/debrun.asp>